

Message Text

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ACTION NODS-00

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /001 W
-----071635Z 100111 /41
O 071347Z JUN 77
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6546

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 4042

NODIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, IS
SUBJECT: GENERAL GUR'S WORRIES ABOUT WAR FEVER

SUMMARY: IN A MEETING WHICH SENATOR STONE AND I HAD WITH GENERAL GUR ON JUNE 3, THE CHIEF OF STAFF SAID HE THOUGHT THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST WAS CHARACTERIZED BY AN ATMOSPHERE OF INCREASING MISUNDERSTANDING, SUSPICION AND TENSION. THIS WORRIED HIM GREATLY. HE ATTRIBUTED THE ROOT CAUSE OF THIS ATMOSPHERE TO PRESIDENT CARTER'S STATEMENTS, BUT HE WAS WILLING TO ACCEPT THAT THE LIKUD VICTORY AND THE POSITIONS WHICH BEGIN HAD TAKEN ARE ADDING TO THE TENSION. THE GENERAL SAID HE FAVORED THE STEP-BY-STEP NEGOTIATING PROCESS BECAUSE HE THOUGHT THE SEARCH FOR AN OVERALL SOLUTION REDUCED THE AVAILABLE OPTIONS AND FUELED THE TALK OF WAR, AND HE ESPECIALLY DEPLORED PUBLIC TALK ABOUT URGENT TIME-TABLES FOR CONVENING GENEVA. END SUMMARY.

1. GENERAL GUR'S VERY CALM BUT SOMBER COMMENTS MADE A DEEP IMPRESSION ON BOTH SENATOR STONE AND ME. THE GENERAL'S DESCRIPTION OF A "BAD ATMOSPHERE" IN THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY WAS BASED, HE ADMITTED, ON HIS FEELINGS MORE THAN ON ANY SPECIFIC FACTORS ALTHOUGH HE DID ENUMERATE SEVERAL. THE PRINCIPAL REASONS, HE MAIN-
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TAINED, FOR THE CURRENT UNEASE, SUSPICION AND MISUNDERSTANDING ARE STATEMENTS MADE BY PRESIDENT CARTER AND THEIR ASSOCIATED "CLARIFICATIONS," BEGINNING WITH THE FIRST REFERENCE AT CLINTON TO A PALESTINIAN "HOMELAND." "NOBODY KNOWS WHAT TO BELIEVE," GUR LAMENTED. ALTHOUGH THE LIKUD'S ELECTION VICTORY AND BEGIN'S SUBSEQUENT STATEMENTS HAD ADDED TO THE SUSPICION AND CONCERN, THE

GENERAL INSISTED THAT THE CURRENT BAD ATMOSPHERE WAS
"AN ARTIFICIAL CHANGE THAT DID NOT START IN THE
MIDDLE EAST."

2. GUR SEES THE MIDDLE EAST AS A VERY COMPLEX PROBLEM.
THERE COULD BE NO PERMANENT "ONCE AND FOR ALL" SOLUTION.
FOR THAT REASON, HE SAID THAT HE WAS AN ADVOCATE OF THE
STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS OF NEGOTIATION. THAT PROCESS
PROVIDED EVERYONE WITH OPTIONS, ALLOWING THE VARIOUS
LEADERS TO PLAY TOUGH OR SOFT ACCORDING TO THE REALITIES
AND THE NEED TO SATISFY THEIR OWN PEOPLES. THE STEP-BY-
STEP APPROACH REQUIRES A DEFINED POLITICAL PROCESS AND
A BASIC CALMNESS; IT WAS THIS PROCESS AND THIS CALMNESS
WHICH HAD BROUGHT ABOUT THE SINAI II AGREEMENT BY WHICH
ISRAEL HAD BEEN INDUCED TO GIVE UP STRATEGIC TERRAIN
AND TO TAKE THE CHANCE (OR ACCEPT THE RISK) OF
BETTER RELATIONS.

3. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE IDEA OF AN OVERALL SETTLE-
MENT, WITH DEADLINES AND TIMETABLES, IS JUST NOT
WORKABLE, AND DANGEROUS. HE ESPECIALLY DEPLORED SETTING
A PUBLIC DEADLINE FOR CONVENING GENEVA, AND TALKING
ABOUT IT AS IF IT WERE "NOW OR NEVER." WHEN THIS CON-
CEPT IS INTRODUCED, OPTIONS ARE CLOSED, PEOPLE BEGIN TO
TALK ABOUT WAR, AND THERE IS INCREASED MISUNDERSTANDING,
SUSPICION, AND TENSION. THE GENERAL DID NOT BELIEVE
THAT ANY MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRY WANTED WAR IN 1977:
"HOWEVER, RUMORS, TALK, AND COMMENT ABOUT WAR START
A CHAIN OF EVENTS THAT CAN INEVITABLY LEAD TO WAR."

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AND HE SAID THAT HE WAS HEARING TOO MUCH OF THIS KIND
OF TALK, ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDERS.

4. GENERAL GUR WAS MORE SPECIFIC IN DISCUSSING EGYPT.
HE SAID THAT COUNTRY HAD BEGUN TO IMPROVE ITS MILITARY
READINESS IN FEBRUARY, AND ITS ACTIVITIES IN MAY HAD
REFLECTED A THREE-FOLD INCREASE OVER THOSE OF MAY IN
PREVIOUS YEARS. WITHIN THE LAST TWO MONTHS, FOR
EXAMPLE, EGYPT HAD CONDUCTED TWO EXERCISES IN WHICH IT
BROUGHT MORE VEHICLES AND MEN ACROSS THE SUEZ CANAL
THAN PERMITTED BY THE SINAI II AGREEMENT; WHAT IS MORE
PUZZLING, IT DID NOT EVEN TRY TO CONCEAL THAT FACT.
FURTHERMORE, HE SAID, THERE HAD BEEN RECENT VIOLATIONS

OP NOTE: DESTROY SEGMENT 11633/185

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ACTION NODS-00

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /001 W
-----071639Z 100136 /41
O 071347Z JUN 77
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6547

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DISCOVERED BY UNEF OBSERVERS, SUCH AS EXCESS NUMBERS OF BATTALIONS AND MEN AND THE PRESENCE OF SAM-7'S IN THE LIMITED FORCES AREA. IN THE PAST EGYPT HAD VIOLATED THE TERMS OF SINAI II AGREEMENT IN WAYS THE GENERAL COULD UNDERSTAND AND EXPLAIN AS A PROFESSIONAL MILITARY MAN (WHILE NOT APPROVING OF THEM), BUT THESE CURRENT ACTIONS HE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND. HE COULD SEE NO MILITARY LOGIC IN THEM.

5. CARRYING HIS POINT FURTHER, GENERAL GUR SAID THAT THAT VERY DAY HE WAS ASSESSING THE SITUATION IN BOTH THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH BECAUSE OF THE CURRENT STATE OF TENSION AND SUSPICION. YET HE WAS CONSTRAINED FROM MAKING ANY CHANGES IN THE DISPOSITION OF FORCES BECAUSE THE MOVES MIGHT BE MISINTERPRETED - AND ADD TO THE TENSIONS.

6. CONCLUDING ON A MORE SPECULATIVE NOTE, GENERAL GUR SAID THAT THE ARABS MIGHT CONSIDER THAT WITH ISRAEL NOW BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS THIS WOULD BE A GOOD TIME FOR A SURPRISE ATTACK. NOT THAT HE BELIEVED THERE IS DANGER OF ANOTHER 1973-TYPE ATTACK. RATHER, HE SPECULATED, THE ARABS MIGHT TRY A LIMITED SURPRISE ATTACK ON, SAY, THE ISRAELI OBSERVATION POST ON MT.

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HERMON OR AGAINST THE OIL AREA (ON THE ISRAELI-CLAIMED SIDE) OF THE GULF OF SUEZ. SUCH A MOVE COULD BE INTENDED TO PROVOKE AN ISRAELI OVERACTION, WHICH

COULD FURTHER ALIENATE ISRAEL FROM THE U.S. AT THIS DELICATE MOMENT.

6. COMMENT: GENERAL GUR HAS BEEN MUCH IN THE NEWS IN RECENT DAYS AS THE COMANDER OF THE PARATROOPS WHO TOOK EAST JERUSALEM TEN YEARS AGO. HIS MOOD, HOWEVER, WHEN SENATOR STONE AND I TALKED TO HIM WAS DISTINCTLY NOT ONE OF JUBILATION - QUITE THE REVERSE. THE DEPARTMENT IS AWARE OF INDICATIONS IN RECENT MONTHS OF VARIOUS MOVES, PARTICULARLY ON THE EGYPTIAN SIDE, WHICH HAVE CAUSED THE ISRELIS CONCERN. NONE OF THESE PARTICULAR EVENTS HAVE BEEN IN THEMSELVES ENOUGH FOR A CASUS BELLI, BUT TAKEN TOGETHER THEY SEEM TO THE ISRAELIS TO BE PROOF THAT THE EGYPTIANS HAVE BY NO MEANS FORECLOSED THE WAR OPTION.

7. THE SENATOR AND I WERE BOTH IMPRESSED BY THE CALM TENOR OF GENERAL GUR'S COMMENTS AS HE EXPRESSED HIS CONCERNS TO US. IT WAS ALMOST AS THOUGH HE WAS SEEKING TO CONVINCE HIMSELF AS MUCH AS US. THOUGH LOGIC IS WHOLLY ON THE OTHER SIDE, NEITHER THE ISRAELIS NOR WE CAN PRUDENTLY EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY OF A LIMITED MILITARY SURPRISE DESIGNED FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES.

8. I NOTE THAT GENERAL GUR EXPRESSED SOMEWHAT SIMILAR VIEWS IN A SPEECH HE MADE JUNE 6 TO THE B'NAI B'RITH NATIONAL CONVENTION HERE. IN THAT SPEECH HE SAID THAT WAR COULD BREAK OUT IN THE MIDDLE EAST "WITHOUT ANY RELATIONSHIP TO ACTION BY ISRAEL OR TO THE TERRITORIES IT HOLDS." HE WENT ON TO SAY, I REGRET TO REPORT, THAT "ANOTHER LESSON IS THAT WE CANNOT PUT TOO MUCH FAITH IN PROMISES SUCH AS THE AMERICAN GUARANTEE TO KEEP THE STRAITS OF TIRAN OPEN, WHICH PROVED WORTHLESS WHEN
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EGYPT CLOSED THE STRAITS BEFORE THE SIX-DAY WAR. AFTER THE YOM KIPPUR WAR, WHEN WE ASKED THE U.S. TO PUT CERTAIN PROMISES IN WRITING, IT WAS HINTED THAT WRITTEN AGREEMENTS DO NOT OBLIGATE SUPER POWERS. WHEN IT IS IN THE SUPER POWER'S INTEREST, HELP WILL BE GIVEN WITHOUT WRITTEN AGREEMENT. WHEN IT IS NOT, NO DOCUMENTS WILL HELP."

9. I PLAN TO KEEP IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH GENERAL GUR AND WITH HIS NEW CHIEF, EZER WEIZMAN. IF THE PESSIMISTIC APPRAISAL OF THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE WHICH THE GENERAL HAS BEEN EXPRESSING BECOMES THE POLICY APPROACH OF THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT, THERE COULD BE TROUBLE FOR ALL OF US.
LEWIS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PERSONAL OPINION, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, MILITARY BUILDUP, PEACE PLANS, NEGOTIATIONS, CAT-B
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 07-Jun-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977TELAV04042
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: P850106-1676, N770003-0654
Format: TEL
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770681/aaaactbx.tel
Line Count: 223
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: af1b3a83-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NODS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: NODIS
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: NODIS
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 04-Feb-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2241749
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: GENERAL GUR'S WORRIES ABOUT WAR FEVER
TAGS: PFOR, MOPS, PDEV, US, IS, XF, EG
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/af1b3a83-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009